

OKLAHOMA SHORT VERSION  
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December 7, 1941, and I had just finished typing and posting the Sick List and Binnacle List. I was wrapping Christmas gifts for mailing to my folks in Indiana when the speaker system bellowed "AIR ATTACK, AIR ATTACK, ALL HANDS SEEK COVER". Then almost immediately, "GENERAL QUARTERS, MAN YOUR BATTLE STATIONS". For a long moment I stood there in disbelief, drill on Sunday morning just before liberty starts. There was some credence to the idea as we were to have our Annual Military Inspection the next day when the Admiral and about 200 inspectors would come on board and go over us in great detail, and a surprise drill was to be expected. That lent authenticity to my belief. We had already removed blister plates for the occasion. I picked up my first aid kit and proceeded to my battle station, After Battle Dressing, on the third deck in the Carpenter Shop, port side. As I made my way aft on the third deck I felt the ship start listing to port. I never felt nor heard any explosions and thought, "My God, they are flooding the blister". But arriving almost simultaneously with my four stretcher bearers I remembered our inspection preparations and knew something was radically wrong.

As the ship took on a fifteen degree list I told my four helpers we had better make our way to the starboard side where the Damage Control group was already lining up against the bulkhead. We did so by walking on tables, lathes and other bolted down machinery, hand-walking the overhead pipes. What saved our lives was the fact that all hatches, including ammunition loading hatches, were open. These loading hatches are enclosed in a square tube and go straight up and down from the weather deck to the lowest half deck. At about 45 degrees the man at the head of the line entered the hatch, followed by each of us in turn. I think I was in the last quarter section of the line of about fifteen men. When it came my turn I didn't use the rung ladder, but walked up the bulkhead to the weather deck and stood on the side of the #4 turret. Looking up as the rest of our group flashed by me, I saw a vertical Main deck Aft slowly rolling above me and realized it could come down on top of me. Kicking off my untied shoes and discarding my first aid kit (Yeah! I didn't realize till then I still had it), I dove into the water and swam like a hovercraft till I had to come up for breath. I was out from under the ship but right in the middle of a pool of bunker oil and it got into my eyes. Ducking, I swam under water with my eyes open to wash them out. Did this three times at the end of which I found myself in mid-channel along with a lot of other men. I remember hearing plunking sounds under water, now I found out the cause. I heard machine gun fire and turning I saw a plane with guns blazing coming right at me, but before any further reaction the plane was gone and I wasn't hit. A motor launch came along side to start picking up us swimmers. I told the Ensign I would rather swim ashore but was ordered into the boat at the point of a gun. Covered as I was with oil I guess maybe he thought I was enemy. It took three people to get me over the side of the boat I was so slippery and I could give them very little help. With a full load of swimmers the boat gently beached on the married quarters island across from battleship row. I took about ten steps up from the beach and collapsed. I had turned to look at the havoc across the

channel and immediately went into shock. I sat looking at the black smoke and could see the bottom of my ship protruding from the water. Finally the hot sun on my oil covered skin brought me back to reality. Standing I took off my oil covered t-shirt and discarded it (our uniform was t-shirts and white Bermuda shorts). Taking off my shorts and turning them inside out I managed to wipe a lot of oil off my face, but still not good enough so I took off my under shorts and was doing a credible job when a female voice behind me said, "Can you use a towel sailor?" Donning my shorts the towel was a godsend.

We walked across the causeway to the enlisted quarters at the Sub Base where three showers and kerosene cleansed my skin of oil. An unknown shipmate gave me a dungaree shirt and trousers and a pair of sandals. Then I heard that Captain E. J. Foy, our previous skipper, was handing out post cards to Oklahoma sailors. We were well acquainted as I had been his Swedish Masseur during his tour on the ship and received a heartfelt welcome from him along with the post card. He told me to address it, say I'm OK and give it back as he would mail it in the states when he returned the following week. Many of us started relating our experiences in getting off the ship and this is where I met one of the crew who had been trapped in an air pocket along with John Schoonover, Pharmacist's Mate First Class who weighed about 230 pounds and knew he would never get out. He assisted four other men to dive to the porthole and squeeze thru, the skinniest going first.

Hearing rumors that the Japs were landing on the island, many of us made our way to Ford Island, believing that would be the place of last resort. My stomach finally gave me an urgent call for food. I hadn't eaten since breakfast. A supply officer opened a storage facility on the island and this was the first and only time I ate hardtack and some sort of meat spread and loved it. The next morning I went to the hospital to go to work. Chief Elkins was still there and remembered me from my short tour of duty there. I was put to work on the night shift on a ward full of burned patients. It was frustrating anguished work, knowing that all our efforts were not going to save many of those badly burned men. In mid-December I was ordered to an Army transport which loaded every patient capable of travel for return to the states. We arrived on Christmas Day in San Francisco and I was able to Western Union my folks their first knowledge I was OK.